Ruminative and reflective forms of self-focus: Their relationships with interpersonal skills and emotional reactivity under interpersonal stress

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ABSTRACT

Self-focus can be divided into adaptive and maladaptive aspects, that is, self-reflection and self-rumination respectively. This study explores how these distinctive forms of self-focus are associated with interpersonal skills required for beginning and maintaining social relationships, and with negative emotional regulation when one experiences interpersonal problems. A survey of 150 undergraduates (Study 1) indicated contrasting cross-sectional associations between self-reflection and self-rumination and interpersonal skills; self-rumination is associated with perceived impaired interpersonal skills, whereas self-reflection is associated with the improved skills. In Study 2, using a four-wave longitudinal design, we investigated the buffering effects of self-rumination and self-reflection on negative emotional reactivity to interpersonal conflicts. Analysis of multilevel models indicated that self-rumination predicts a greater increase in negative affect after one experiences negative interpersonal events, whereas self-reflection had no such effects on the negative affect. These results suggest that self-rumination is associated with perceived impaired interpersonal skills, which could delay problem solving and exacerbate the effect of interpersonal problems, thereby leading to dysphoria. In contrast, self-reflection might contribute to the maintenance of relationships in usual or stable conditions but does not aid emotion regulation or problem solving in difficult or negative situations such as when one experiences interpersonal problems.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Self-rumination and self-reflection

Focusing on inner feelings and confronting problems has both positive and negative influence on psychological adjustment. Private self-consciousness, a tendency to attend to one's inner thoughts and feelings (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), is known to be associated with high levels of dysphoric moods, including depression, anxiety, and negative moods (Mor & Winquist, 2002). Therefore, focusing on one's inner self was considered a maladaptive cognitive style. However, theorists have also proposed that self-focus may have beneficial as well as unconstructive outcomes (e.g., Watkins, 2008). Self-focus can be conceptualized as a process of problem solving or self-regulation and can increase self-knowledge and facilitate psychological adjustment (Martin & Tesser, 1996; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Therefore, Trapnell and Campbell (1999) distinguished between the rumination and reflection subtypes of private self-consciousness on the basis of motivation and the five-factor model of personality.

Self-rumination is a form of negative, chronic, and persistent self-focus that is motivated by perceived threats, losses, or injustice to the self and is associated with neuroticism and depression. Self-reflection is a contrasting form of self-focus that is motivated by curiosity or epistemic interest in self and is associated with openness to experiences leading to the promotion of self-knowledge and enhancement of mental health. Self-rumination and self-reflection are distinctively correlated with affective and cognitive variables. Self-rumination is associated with decreased levels of happiness and increased levels of depression, whereas self-reflection is associated with increased levels of happiness and decreased levels of depression (Elliot & Coker, 2008; Takano & Tanno, 2009). In relation to memory measures, self-rumination was negatively correlated with the happiness of memories, whereas this was not observed in the case of self-reflection (Teasdale & Green, 2004).

1.2. Self-focus and interpersonal skills

In order to differentiate between the positive and negative aspects of self-focus (i.e., self-reflection and self-rumination), previous studies suggest that social and interpersonal behaviors should be considered. For example, individuals who turned attention to self when they were alone experienced higher levels of

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dysphoria (Sakamoto, 2000), and social interactions might distract individuals with depressive moods from engaging in rumination (Schwerdtfeger & Friedrich-Mai, 2009). Thus, elucidating the distinctive associations between self-focus, in terms of the dichotomy of self-rumination versus self-reflection, and social functioning would contribute to understanding how self-focus could facilitate or impair psychosocial adjustment. Therefore, in the present study, we investigated the associations between self-rumination and self-reflection and interpersonal skills.

Extant literature on depressive rumination suggests that depressive rumination is associated with impaired social problem-solving skills and maladaptive interpersonal behaviors. Experimental studies indicate that depressive ruminators generate less effective solutions to interpersonal problems and have less energy and motivation to address and solve such problems (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995; Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell, & Berg, 1999). Furthermore, correlational studies indicate that depressive rumination and the more dysfunctional component of brooding are associated with higher levels of interpersonal difficulties in intimate relationships and maladaptive interpersonal cognitions and behaviors such as rejection sensitivity and submissive interpersonal styles (Lam, Schuck, Smith, Farmer, & Checkley, 2003; Pearson, Watkins, Mullan, & Moberly, 2010).

In contrast, some studies suggest that self-focus is associated with improved interpersonal skills and potentially contributes to better social functioning. Riggio (1986) indicates that private self-consciousness is associated with increased emotional sensitivity of the social skills, which is a prerequisite for detecting others' emotional states and allows rapid and efficient emotional communication. Particularly, self-reflection has a positive correlation with empathetic concern and perspective taking (Joireman, Parrott, & Hammersla, 2002). These findings highlight better social functioning due to self-focus; self-reflection would be associated with improved interpersonal skills and contributes to effective problem solving for interpersonal conflicts.

It is noteworthy that some studies on depressive rumination have failed to identify the adaptive function of reflection, and the findings on the reflective forms of self-focus are mixed. In line with the conceptualization of Trapnell and Campbell (1999), Treynor, Gonzalez, and Nolen-Hoeksema (2003) also found the adaptive and maladaptive factors of depressive rumination, namely, brooding and reflective pondering, and suggested the reflection component predicts a decrease in depressive symptoms at one-year follow up. However, studies suggest that this reflection component is associated with the concurrent level of and future increase in suicidal ideation (Miranda & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2007; O'Connor & Noyce, 2008), suggesting that reflection is not a uniformly adaptive cognitive process in the context (Surrence, Miranda, Marroquin, & Chan, 2009). Considering this instability in reflection, the present study aimed at clarifying the adaptiveness of self-focus from the perspective of interpersonal functioning.

1.3. Overview of the present study

This study aims to explore the distinctive associations between self-reflection and self-rumination and interpersonal skills. In Study 1, we investigated the associations between the two forms of self-focus and interpersonal skills in cross-sectional design. We hypothesized that self-rumination is associated with impaired interpersonal skills, whereas self-reflection is associated with improved skills. However, such cross-sectional analyses have implications only on the general abilities of ruminators and reflectors measured by a questionnaire, and therefore, their actual responses and regulations after experiencing interpersonal problems need to be investigated and compared. In Study 2, using a multi-wave longitudinal assessment, we explored the prospective associations between the two forms of self-focus and negative emotional reactivity to interpersonal problems. If ruminators possess impaired interpersonal skills, they are hypothesized to exhibit a greater increase in negative moods when they experience interpersonal conflicts. On the other hand, if reflectors possess sufficient interpersonal skills, they are expected not to show any increase in negative moods even when they confront interpersonal problems.

2. Study 1

Considering the previous findings that rumination is associated with impaired interpersonal problem solving (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995), we hypothesized that self-rumination is associated with low levels of the three interpersonal skills. On the other hand, in the light of the suggestion that reflective pondering is associated with adaptive coping styles such as problem solving (Burwell & Shirk, 2007), self-reflection is associated with high levels of interpersonal skills. Regarding interpersonal skills, we considered the following three concepts: relationship initiation is a skill required when a person meets someone for the first time and initiates a new relationship. Self-assertiveness is the skill of expressing true feelings while showing respect for others. Relationship maintenance is the skill of maintaining existing interpersonal relationships.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

In total, 150 Japanese undergraduates (95 females) completed a packet of questionnaires in an introductory psychology course at several Japanese universities. The mean age of 144 participants—data of six participants were not considered because they did not report their age—was 20.8 years (SD = 4.2 years).

2.1.2. Measures

The packet of questionnaires contained the measures of self-rumination, self-reflection, and interpersonal skills. Self-rumination and self-reflection were assessed using the Rumination–Reflection Questionnaire (RRQ; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Each subscale of self-reflection and self-rumination consisted of 12 items and all the items were rated on a 5-point scale, with options ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). These scales had good internal consistency (alpha = .88 for self-rumination; alpha = .88 for self-reflection). Interpersonal skills were measured using the social skills self-rating scale for adults (Aikawa & Fujita, 2005). This scale contains six subscales: encoding, decoding, emotional control, relationship initiation, self-assertiveness, and relationship maintenance. The former three concepts fall under communication skills, which are required for effective communication, whereas the latter three concepts fall under interpersonal skills, which are required to begin and maintain interpersonal relationships. In the present study, the three subscales of interpersonal skills were assessed because they are directly related to interpersonal problem solving. The relationship-initiation subscale comprised eight items (e.g., "I easily make friends with anybody"); the self-assertiveness subscale contained seven items (e.g., "when someone makes me feel unpleasant, I complain about it"); and the relationship-maintenance subscale included four items (e.g., "I care for others"). All the items were rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (4). Each subscale had sufficient internal consistency (alpha = .66–.90) and is suggested to have good convergent validity, showing negative correlations with interpersonal anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Aikawa & Fujita, 2005).